In Pursuit of Rapid Impacts:

Research with a Difference

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Preface

I am fortunate insofar as my institution (Brunel University) is rooted in the practical arts and sciences, so it is well-placed to meet growing public expectations that research should have 'useful impacts'. The idea that this new journal should make an impact is a welcome one; better still if we mean what the public means by 'impacts' and not impacts as measured according to the number of academic citations which articles published within its pages get in other academic articles which appear in other academic journals. The public does not care especially about 'impacts' in this easy-to-measure-but-not-very-important sense. The public has in mind useful research which leads to changes in practice and the public is right to expect this from us… from which process more apposite theories will emerge.

I would like to pose several questions. Is it possible to devise inquiries that have impacts from Day One of a research project? Might impacts occur before theories are finalised and results published? Can the success and failure of attempts to make a practical difference have an immediate shaping-effect on theory? Can change begin at the moment a fresh question is asked? By re-thinking what is meant by 'Research' and 'Impact', the answers might be 'Yes' to all of these.

Orthodox academic research has practical impacts only indirectly, haphazardly and after delays. Research publications enable researchers to influence each other and to re-think or replace existing approaches. Around five years after research begins some findings may be published. Some policy makers and practitioners may read a few of these findings; however, most papers are not written with their needs in mind and are not expressed in practitioners' day languages. And, as practitioners or policy-makers (etc.) are not usually involved in framing research questions, the answers are likely to be tangential to their needs.

Some policies may be based on these findings, though policy-makers may also be misled by journal biases towards publishing 'positive results' rather than the negative, 'disconfirming' evidence (of which most people remain unaware). While some policies barely progress beyond wishful-thinking, some may take a practical form. Given time, the success or failure of these practices may be acknowledged. Especially in public policy, it could be thirty years before any failures are pinned on flaws in the original theory – possibly unfairly. That theory may be discarded eventually. But by this time 'the way the World works' will have changed so that the old theory is not so much 'wrong' as irrelevant. By then the policy landscape will

be unrecognisable from what it once was. Innumerable social imperatives and associated 'research gaps' will have opened, closed and been forgotten; many '-isms' having become '-wasms' (as my late grandfather used to say) and many 'wasms' will re-appear as 'isms' to be written about in ignorance of earlier rounds of research, using new terminology for old ideas. This approach is inefficient, costly and - arguably - not especially scientific nor impactful.

I stress that journals focus on impacts which the public does not ordinarily think of as impacts. 'Citation Indexes' tracking the impact which academics have on other academics allow journals to calculate their 'Research Impact Factors' independently of whether their publications have any practical effects. There is also a danger that in the interests of posting statistically significant results, researchers establish causal relationships that are obvious and which the public could have guessed for themselves at quite easily. I read recently a 'top journal article' that recommended that before entering into international joint ventures, managers should know the risks as well as the rewards. Another paper in the same journal warned managers not to price products at a level that would 'alienate their customers'. The authors did not say how those 'risks' could be assessed nor how pricing should be done. You will agree. I think, that as far as practical relevance goes, anybody could have told you so and that these statements are of no use. And worse still these recommendations did not flow especially from the research which these authors had conducted. Anyone could have said as much, before or after the data was gathered, and my best guess is that practitioners would not be impressed. It is like saying 'people continue to buy products they like from vendors they trust'. We know!

And, the suggestion that research should be about identifying and filling-in existing 'research gaps' is also to be mistrusted. Filling-in a gap implies that the researcher is of low stature and has no right to question the fundamental assumptions which inform what many others claim to be known already. Gap-filling implies that researchers are of modest importance who are not licenced to present big challenges to the findings and methodologies of established scholars – at least not in such a way that would suggest that the edifice within which a gap has been found, should really be *demolished* rather than have, so-to-speak, a doorway bricked-up here or a missing roof-tile replaced there. This is especially true of social subject matter where there remain truly profound and enduring paradigm differences which cannot be overcome. Every now and again big events such as the global financial crisis demonstrate that what passed as orthodoxy yesterday can be brought to its knees by surprising events tomorrow. These constraints enliven research and we are better-off for having them.

These banal but statistically significant truths are insufficient for navigating the particular, complex and more-or-less unique sets of circumstances in which practitioners practice and we thought about these challenges when planning a Brunel-sponsored 'Master Seminar' series, seeking to design-in practical impacts from the outset. The aims were to

- act on vexatious live challenges chosen not by academics but by six practitioners at Chief Executive, Director and Senior Officer level
- enhance the institution's reputation for 'thinking theoretically about practice and thinking practically about theory'
- Test-out some propositions by applying them during the course of the series and at low-cost or no-cost
- Include non-academics in writing-up knowledge developed jointly

My wish here is not to use this Foreword to sing the praises of my own institution, but instead to hint at some fresh approaches to inquiry which ensure the sort of 'impacts' which the public may have in mind. Meretta Elliott (School of Arts) and I use 'applied drama' (AD) techniques to accelerate 'professional development' and to enable 'wicked problems'

(complex difficulties faced by many people and which tend to turn into new problems once they are acted on) to be analysed in-the-round and acted on forthwith. These approaches have been used on behalf of several UK institutions: The Royal College of Nursing; Kent Constabulary; The Faculty of Occupational Medicine; HM Prison Service; Cardboard Citizens (a charity for the homeless) and other organisations. AD is 'research but not as we know it':

Three AD approaches were adapted over the course of four events: 'Learning Sets', 'Human Tableaux' and 'Object Theatre' (there are many others). Six invitations were accepted by elite contacts. The participants were drawn from the fields of clinical and public health, education and charitable work; nominated by a highly respected public figure according to their responsibilities for 'community safety', 'inclusion' and 'social cohesion'. Of course we felt some sympathy with their aims and responsibilities. We were in a position to do this through prior links created through Catherine Darlington's research. My point is that you would be able to issue invitations to whosoever had anything to do with changes you might be interested in facilitating quickly and values which you sympathised with.

An abundance of knowledge was gained. Meeting under Chatham House Rules, the participants felt confident enough to discuss sensitive topics and to revisit them three or four times. These included challenges which they were unable to discuss with work colleagues. Over one hundred and twenty 'top-secret' pages of detailed scribe-notes were taken and shared within the group for them to amend. This content cannot be reported directly, but the themes identified by the participants and the solutions which they discussed, warrant writing-up. These themes – which the organisers had not envisaged - were resilience, resourcefulness and responsibility. Doubtless were you to take a similar approach, the themes would be different. But what about the techniques which elicited them?

Learning Sets involve close scrutiny of challenges presented serially in structured round-table discussions between a maximum of six participants[1] . One hour is devoted to each participant. Thus:

- A vexatious difficulty is described including any theory and evidence which the participant thinks relevant. (Practitioners offer many theories without necessarily recognising that they are theories.)
- this participant now reverses their chair, turning their back on the group keeping silent while others dissect 'What they have heard' and generate a set of theoretical, factual and practical questions. Sometimes more is heard implicitly than was said explicitly
- The member turns back, facing the group and answers these questions
- S/he is asked about the practical steps s/he proposes
- The group discusses the credibility of these measures
- The member chooses an action, field-tests it and reports its effects the next time the Set meets
- The sequence is repeated for each individual, facilitators ensuring equal 'air-time' for all

Like orthodox research Learning Sets

- discuss theories and evidence
- establish new questions and revise hypotheses

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[1] See Judith Riley 'Learning Sets – a tool for developing multi-agency, multi-professional approaches to public health' and Gubbay 'Courses for action: the case for experimental learning programmes in public health'.

But they also entail:

- Direct practitioner-involvement
- Round-table examination of live and emotionally charged challenges within a confidential circle of critical friends; establishing reciprocity among those involved in the 'muck and bullets'
- Identification of specific steps meant to have impact within days, weeks or months
- Positivistic exposure of hypotheses to possible negative findings in practice

Human Tableaux were created at the second gathering – with shoes removed and after a 'Newsround'. Tableaux involve expressing and exploring similarly complex and pressing subject-matter but this time embodied in human physical form. For example a pair of participants depicted 'thriving on chaos'. They stood opposite, arms intersecting (without touching) while looking and pointing forefingers in different random directions. This 'Now' image was followed by a 'Five Years from Now' image. It was similar insofar as the pair were looking and pointing in equally random but different directions. This tableau was examined from different angles by other participants. It embodied the propositions that 'Chaos enables you to make changes' and 'I can't tell how things will be in Primary Care in five years' time; but they'll be just as chaotic and I will still be taking advantages of the opportunities which chaos presents. Chaos makes things possible!'

Every participant was able to direct others to create vivid and intriguing tableaux for their 'Presents' and 'Futures'; interrogating 'How they might get from Here to There'. Catherine Darlington photographed these and scribed all the discussions[2]. These Tableaux were re-created at the third event for further inspection, discussion and refinement.

Animated discussions were had, making creative use of space and inspecting each image from every angle. Meretta points out that 'Images often succeed where words fail. Previously overlooked features and possibilities get noticed. By picturing a series of 'transition' images, it becomes easier to identify what steps can be taken in order to reach successive stages. You can also 'back-cast' from the stage you want to reach to where you are now, like a strip-cartoon drawn backwards. Then you can go through the issues frame-by-frame asking how do I get from this frame to the next?'

Object Theatre Challenges may also be 'objectified' in a quite different way and at the fourth session

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[2] To protect the identity of participants, tableaux can be re-created by other individuals and photographed again for possible publication
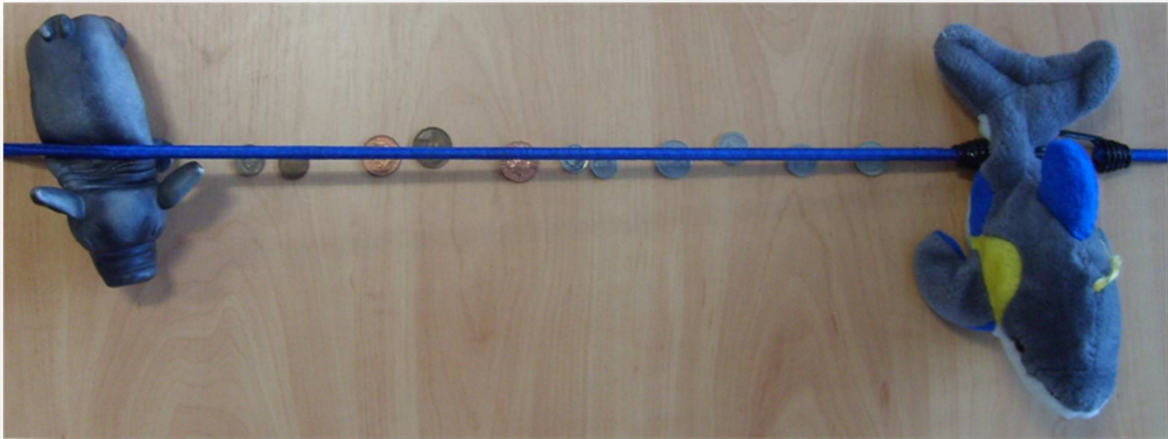
(also after a 'Newsround' of what had happened in the intervening period since the last meeting) participants arranged objects to show what they were addressing now and re-arranged them to depict the problem solved. In this example, two sections of an organisation are shown in dispute over resources and over the scope of its business. One wing is tied down by a 'bungee' of its own making which also constrains how money is spent and what it is spent on. The Chief Executive who created the image spoke to it at length, discussing the many steps he was taking (the dolphin representing the tendency which he wanted to prevail and the pig the constraints he wanted to overcome). A very rich group discussion followed. The 'future' image (below) is the hypothetical outcome; a model, a defensible-simplification, which can be tested empirically nevertheless. Here the 'pig' element is gone and resources are harnessed to an enlarged purpose. This image shows a new capacity for forwards movement. Ten coins are 'heads up' and only one 'heads down', as the participant was optimistic of success. We shall learn of theout-turn soon enough…. But readers may also notice the strong value content also expressed by the image. It may be thought of as a 'totem' which depicts moral imperatives, scientific propositions and a social collectivity[3] all at once.

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[3]See Emile Durkheim's Elementary forms of the Religious Life for a complex discussion of totems

So What?

The group met while not-for-profit services were already subject to severe financial pressures and disruptive reorganisations. Morale continues to be threatened. Yet the sessions were lively and focussed on each member's primary task in realistic ways. Neither 'magic solutions' nor fatalism formed any parts of the discussions. It can be reported that participants said that the series helped them to stay 'on the front foot', continuing to undertake their duties in a resourceful ways. The group also contributed to members' resilience. The participants demonstrated striking ability to articulate values, theories, evidence and actions in particular and pertinent ways – with perhaps more fluency, playfulness and risk-taking than academics accomplish… and did so with precision.

Leaders dealing with change at high levels of complexity have much to teach academics and by placing practitioners at the centre and outset of inquiries it is easier to be alert to their knowledge. The next step in the process is to draft a paper on the themes identified by the group. Criticism, additions and deletions will be invited from members working as referees as well as co-authors: for they remain more expert in their fields than academics can usually expect to become. Their knowledge matter in the here-and-now. These elements (Learning Set, Tableaux, Object Theatre and Co-authorship) seem to lend themselves to fields where highly contingent interactions are occurring between many variables and values, under conditions that are difficult to replicate, whose outcomes are hard to forecast and yet where there is an urgent need to act. They meet Charles Lindblom's plea for a 'science of muddling through' instead of comprehensive but ultimately doomed attempts at 'root and branch analysis'[4] and comprehensive generalisations.

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[4] Charles E Lindblom (1959) 'The Science of "Muddling Through"' Public Administration Review, 19, 2

Readers might not think of AD techniques as 'scientific'; nevertheless for complex challenges where something needs doing they may be hard to beat. I hope this journal will give them house room and if it does we can infer with confidence that articles appearing within it have already had impacts – of the sort the public understands and wishes for – before they have even appeared in print rather than many years afterwards.

As for 'filling research gaps' that exist only for academics and which make not much practical difference, please forget them! The interests of science will be advanced by this practically-minded approach which allows for the testing, discarding or revision of theories rather faster than we accomplish normally. Time for a change.